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Burma: Armed Ethnic Group Leadership Changes Muddle Peace Process

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Burma's armed ethnic groups face leadership changes and internal rifts that might create hurdles in the already difficult peace process. Shifting power centers in signatories and nonsignatories to the Nationwide Cease-Fire Agreement (NCA) may result in changes among key negotiators in talks to end decades of conflict, including the second "21st Century Panglong" peace conference tentatively planned for April or May.

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— [] The Karen National Union (KNU), Burma's oldest armed ethnic group and a key NCA signatory, will choose a new lineup at a congress that began on 14 March and will run for three weeks. []

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[] the internal KNU struggle threatens to split the group or bring to power a new leader skeptical of the peace process.

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— [] The United Wa State Army (UWSA), Burma's largest armed ethnic group and an NCA nonsignatory, plans a shakeup of its nine-member Politburo this year. []

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— [] The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), another key nonsignatory, is split between leaders favoring engagement with the government and those favoring closer ties to China. []

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[] KIA brigades in northern Shan state have launched counteroffensives since November, sowing doubts that its political negotiators can credibly represent it.

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[] *The Burmese Government and eight armed ethnic groups signed the NCA on 15 October 2015, establishing the current framework for the peace process. Seven other armed ethnic groups who were invited to join, including the KIA and the UWSA, did not sign the agreement, at least in part to protest the military's refusal to allow three other armed ethnic groups to sign.*

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Potential leadership changes are creating uncertainty that may further complicate the peace process.

The government, military, and armed ethnic groups are still seeking agreement on key issues, such as disarmament, local autonomy, and constitutional change.

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— [] A contender to head the KNU wants to review the NCA and its implementation. []

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[] Attempts to change the peace process would most likely prompt resistance from Burma's military.

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— [] KIA rank-and-file troops and Kachin community members welcomed KIA offensives because they were frustrated by what they saw as leaders' weakness in the face of attacks by the military. Some Kachin political leaders probably see a higher threshold for face-saving compromises with the government and military.

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— [] Progress toward an inclusive peace agreement will be an important step for the civilian government in earning the military's confidence, meeting voter expectations, and opening the possibility of constitutional change.

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Burma: Armed Ethnic Group Leadership in Flux

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Kachin Independence Army (KIA)

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Some KIA military leaders are acting independently of Kachin political leaders,

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a situation that might lead to a formal split or a prolonged struggle for leadership.

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United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)

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The UNFC, a coalition of ethnic minority groups representing mainly nonsignatories to the Nationwide Cease-Fire Agreement, may also have new leadership this year,

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A new leader from a less influential group could disempower the UNFC as an organizing force among armed ethnic groups.

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United Wa State Army (USWA)

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The UWSA plans its first leadership change since 1992 this year and will probably replace Bao Youxiang, its aging primary decisionmaker,

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Karen National Union (KNU)

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KNU is holding its first leadership congress since 2012 to elect new members to its 11-member Central Executive Committee. Chairman Mutu Say Poe will probably face challenges from a faction led by Vice Chair Zipporah Sein

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